



England Jurisdictions: Understanding Places in England

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Introduction

Often, in the rush to put names and dates into internet search boxes, we do not take time to learn about the places in which our ancestors lived. This aspect of research is critical because any one location is part of multiple jurisdictions. Jurisdictions are created by governments, churches, and other establishments who create records related to defined places. To properly understand the records, we need to understand the place. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to resources that will help you understand a place in England.

The Parish

The parish is the best place to begin understanding England jurisdictions. From medieval times, the parish was central to the lives of our English ancestors and was usually formed around the primary market town in an area. Regardless of whether our ancestors lived on a city street or on a farm near a town or hamlet, many of the records documenting their life events were created and kept by the parish.

Until the 19th century, there was no separation between church and state. The parish had both civil and ecclesiastical responsibilities. It was responsible for tracking the local population by recording their baptisms, marriages, and burials. It also had responsibility to provide for the poor, maintain roadways and public buildings, keep the peace, contribute to the militia, and oversee various other things that are now the primary responsibility of governments.

Civil Jurisdictions

Civil jurisdictions have been created for a variety of reasons and at different points in time. Parishes, as the basic jurisdictional unit, combined to form other civil jurisdictions. More modern ones include:

- **County:** Administrative and geographical areas existing from Norman times, which boundaries stayed relatively stable until minor jurisdictional changes occurred in 1889. A major reform in 1974 created new administrative areas.
- **Hundred (Wapentake, Rape):** A local jurisdiction that could include several parishes (perhaps enough to support 100 families) and survived into the 1800's. The last primary record using this jurisdiction is the 1841 Census.
- **Poor Law Union:** Administrative jurisdiction created in 1834 when the civil government took control of caring for the poor.

- **Civil Registration Districts (and sub-districts):** Created in 1837 for the purpose of registering births, marriages, and deaths.
- **Principal and District Probate Registries:** Created in 1858 when the government assumed the responsibility of probating of a person's estate.

Ecclesiastical Jurisdictions

Parishes were the basic religious jurisdictions in the Catholic Church and continued as the basic unit in 1534 when Henry VIII became head of the Church of England. There were about 8,600 parishes existing in England at that time. These are known today as "ancient parishes." They were presided over by vicars and rectors with the assistance of other parish officers.

- **Chapelries:** As the population of parishes grew, rather than creating new parishes, oftentimes chapelries or "chapels of ease" were established. This resulted in new places for parishioners to be baptized, married (sometimes) and buried. Chapelries were often presided over by an unpaid curate and were considered a subdivision of the main parish church.

The creation of additional parishes and chapelries meant that there were over 14,000 extant by 1834, signifying that many parishioners will have their records in more than more than one parish church or chapelry. For this reason, it is very important to know the history of a parish. Never assume that the start date of the registers coincides with the start of the parish. It may be the records began earlier with the main parish, or that the earlier registers haven't survived.

Depending on local needs, parishes belonged to the following jurisdictions following the structure of the church (from smallest to largest):

- **Rural Deanery:** Groups of parishes headed by a rural dean who may be chosen amongst the parish rectors. They became increasingly prominent in the 19th century. There is no genealogical necessity to know the rural deanery for most places in England. However, some places, such as Suffolk, has some records organized by deanery.
- **Archdeaconry:** Many parishes in larger dioceses belonged to archdeaconries presided over by archdeacons. They may have records such as Archdeacon's Transcripts.
- **Diocese:** All parishes and archdeaconries belong to a diocese presided over by a bishop.
- **Province/Archdiocese:** There are two provinces in England, the Province of Canterbury (Southern Province) and the Province of York (Northern Province). The Province of York comprises all counties from Lancashire and Yorkshire northward but also includes Nottinghamshire. The Province of Canterbury covers the remaining counties with the Archbishop of Canterbury being the head of the Church of England.

Informal Regions

Besides the formal jurisdictions noted above, there are many informal regions in England that can be helpful to understand. For example, many of the Puritans came to America from a traditional region known as **East Anglia**. This is an area comprised of Norfolk, Suffolk and, to a lesser extent, Cambridgeshire and Essex. Other informal regions of England include:

- **Cotswolds:** An area in the south central and west of England around the Cotswold Hills. It includes parts of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, and Warwickshire.
- **Home counties:** The counties bordering and near London. These mainly consist of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, and Surrey.

- **Midlands (Mercia):** The central part of England taking in the historical medieval kingdom of Mercia. It incorporates the West Midlands including Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Warwickshire, as well as the East Midlands, with the counties of Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire. In 1994, official East and West Midlands regions were created.

Resources

The key resources for understanding England's jurisdictions are maps and gazetteers. Two great sources providing information and links to online maps and gazetteers are:

- **FamilySearch Research Wiki** (<https://wiki.familysearch.org>): In the search field, enter "England Genealogy." Then, select "Gazetteers" or "Maps" in the *England Background* section on the right. The FamilySearch Wiki also has a county and parish page for every county and ancient parish in England. The county pages have a "Maps" section, while the parish pages have jurisdictional information on the right.
 - **England Jurisdictions 1851** (<https://www.familysearch.org/mapp/>): Maps every parish and lists the relevant jurisdictions.
- **GENUKI** – England (<https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng>): GENUKI contains incredible resources regarding places with links to maps, gazetteers and parish pages.

Gazetteers

A gazetteer is a dictionary of place names. It is arranged alphabetically by place. A gazetteer often relates historical and geographical information about a place. It may:

- Describe a town, village, civil parish, hamlet, city, county, sub-district, or registration district
- Identify important jurisdictions, i.e., which registration district a parish or place resides in
- Outline geographical features such as rivers, mountains, forests, springs, etc.
- Name canals, railways, docks, ports, prisons, workhouses, market towns, post offices, major manufacturing works, major occupations and/or trades, schools and colleges, hospitals, family estates
- List religious denominations: the parish church and names of each chapel of ease within its boundary, as well as nonconformist chapels
- Specify the population

Town and county directories sometimes have excellent gazetteer information. A few key gazetteers available online are:

A Vision of Britain Through Time (www.visionofbritain.org.uk): Free access to a variety of online gazetteers and maps including the key description from *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* by John M. Wilson (1870-2).

British History Online (<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>): Has a variety of gazetteers and maps from the initial search page. It also has Samuel Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary of England* published in 1848 (<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/england>).

Maps

Maps are used to locate the places where your ancestors lived. They can identify political and ecclesiastical boundaries, names of places, and geographic features. Historical maps are especially useful for finding communities that no longer exist and can even provide a snapshot of an ancestor's environment at a time in the distant past.

A visual expression of an ancestor's life events and the world in which he lived can provide clues to discovering interrelationships between people and places that would be impossible to express in words. Of equal importance, maps provide a context to the researcher that will help to enhance the ability to use logic in finding information and people. Maps, particularly when boundaries are shown, can clarify and enlarge the ability to find records for an ancestor.

Historic maps were created for a variety of reasons, none of which were for genealogists. Maps may show the following:

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| • Country | • Tithe | • Railway |
| • County | • Enclosure | • Canal and Waterway |
| • Parish | • Estate | • Religious Circuits |
| • Registration District | • Ordnance Survey | • Roads |
| • Diocesan Boundaries | • Town Plans | • Cemetery Plots |
| • Hundred | • Poor Law Union | |
| • Probate Courts | • Occupational | |

One of the best methods for finding different types of England maps online is to conduct simple internet searches using a location along with some of the key words listed above. Additionally, some key websites that have excellent map collections are:

National Library of Scotland Maps (<https://maps.nls.uk/>): The best website for Ordnance Survey maps for the entire British Isles.

Old-Maps.co.uk (<https://www.old-maps.co.uk/#/>): A commercial site self-proclaiming to be "Britain's most comprehensive historical map archive".

OldMapsOnline (<https://www.oldmapsonline.org/>): Search for a place or browse. When you type in a place name, you can select from several maps for the area from differing time periods. Many are Ordnance Survey but there are others.

Phillimore's Atlas and Index of Parish Registers: Ancestry has digitized this valuable resource for parish maps as of 1831. It also identifies chapelries within a parish. (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8830/>).

A recent book titled *The parish atlas of England: atlas of English parish boundaries* is authored by T.C.H. Cockin and published in 2017. It includes some farm and township names within the parish. (FHL# 942 E7ct).